A Full and Faithful Life
1. Practicing
March 13, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 51:1–2, 10–19
Isaiah 58:3–9a
Matthew 6:1–8, 16–18

"Beware of practicing your piety before others."
Matthew 6:1 (NRSV)

People today are hungry—hungry for the bread that truly satisfies, hungry for an authentic encounter with God and for a life shaped by that encounter. . . . The hunger deep in our souls is fed by the love of the living Christ.

Craig Dykstra
Growing in the Life of Faith

Be with us as we begin again a journey to the cross and to an encounter with a love that will not let us go. Open our hearts to that good news and give us new faith and new resolve to live in the world as your faithful people: through Jesus Christ. Amen.

"There is in the Christian church, and in the United States as a whole, a profound spiritual hunger for something. . . . We would like to be sure that what we are doing as people, as citizens, as families, as a nation is right and good, but deep down we are not sure at all that it is" (*Growing in the Life of Faith,* p. 3). That is the assessment of a man who knows a lot about how Americans are thinking religiously these days, Craig Dykstra, Director of the Lilly Endowment Religion Division.

The words of late Joseph Campbell, popular author and scholar of religion, expand on that thought: "People say that what we are all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're really seeking is an experience of being alive—the rapture of being

alive" (cited by Parker Palmer, *The Active Life,* p. 8). It is the job of religion to identify that deeply and universally experienced human hunger and to address it. It is what Christian faith is about. It is what the church is about. And so this brief series of Lenten sermons explores "A Full and Faithful Life." We will be looking at and thinking about the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus' teachings, the point of which was, and is, to help his disciples, his followers, to meet that deep hunger inside every human being, to get to that sense of wholeness, that "rapture of being alive," to live a full and faithful life.

Generally we have understood Lent as the time of the year when Christians should engage in some kind of sacrificial practice. The idea is that we join Jesus on his final journey to the cross by voluntarily sharing his suffering: a noble idea, to be sure, that is considerably trivialized, if not altogether lost, when reduced to giving up chocolate or Beefeater martinis for a few weeks. As youngsters, observing Catholic chums giving up Hershey bars and doughnuts during Lent, we thought it was absolutely hilarious to declare, "I'm giving up Brussels sprouts this Lent. I'm giving up homework." (It doesn't take much to amuse a preadolescent!) For what it's worth, I have concluded that I cannot begin to participate in Jesus' sufferings and to try by eliminating something I probably don't really need trivializes the great drama of his passion, maybe even insulating me from its power and terrible beauty. And while we would all be better off without chocolate and martinis, to regard their absence from our lives as an approach to what happened to Jesus is slightly ridiculous. Give them up, by all means; just don't claim much spiritual significance or credit.

I have concluded, in this, my last time around, that what Lent is for is for saying something positive, not negative; for living more, not less; for saying "I love you" to God, and "thank you" to God and "I want to be a better follower" to Jesus. Keeping a good Lent, I think, is not so much about reducing caloric intake as it is figuring out things to do that express "I love you," "thank you," "I want to follow you," and then doing it.

Fasting has always been a favorite thing to do for God—long ago, in Jesus' day, and today. In Jesus' day, some people who were fasting did so in as public a way as possible: put on a long, dismal face; show how miserably hungry you are—fasting as amateur theater. Jesus made a joke about it. Five hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had written:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free . . .?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them . . . ?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.
(Isaiah 58:6–8)

At the heart of Jesus' religion, Judaism, is a radical notion: God is rightly addressed, thanked, and worshiped not only when the faithful are engaging in religious practices, but when the needy are helped, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the homeless housed.

True fasting, according to the Bible, involves not just abstaining from something, but deliberately choosing to do something for God by helping those in need, and the promise is that those who fast in this way will be blessed by the fullness of life and light, like the dawn.

Jesus identifies three popular religious practices: almsgiving, praying, and fasting. He critiques each one. Some scholars think he's making jokes, like David Letterman holding up a popular everyday activity and poking fun at it. Almsgiving was a serious, central temple activity. Its purpose was to assure that no one was hungry, particularly the most vulnerable: the orphans—the children—and widows, the sojourners, the undocumented immigrants. Jesus creates a hilarious parody of the practice: a man hires a brass band to announce that he is about to do his religious duty. On praying, Jesus paints a picture of a man praying fervently and passionately on the corner of Delaware and Michigan, loud enough for passersby to hear and admire his piety (like the earnest young man preaching through a microphone and loudspeaker on Saturday night on Rush Street). And the one fasting, of course, with his pathetic posturing—long face, disheveled clothing, straggly hair.

Jesus pokes fun at this use of religious practices for self-promotion, but beneath Jesus' critique is a profound understanding of how the human psyche works—and then a radical proposal. Jesus understands the fragile, needy self inside each one of us that simply can't separate our needs from our attempts to do good and pious things. It seems that we simply can't help

thinking about ourselves. When we give alms, we simply can't help admiring ourselves; when we pray, we can't help listening to ourselves. Many people are uncomfortable being asked to pray, not because they don't have joy and gratitude and blessing in their hearts, but because they fear they won't live up to some gold standard of praying publically. One of the worst things I ever did was use prayer competitively, to outdo someone I needed to outdo. Joanna Adams, a friend of mine years before she came here to be a Co-Pastor, and I were appointed by our denomination to engage in dialogue with a conservative evangelical organization that was very critical of the Presbyterian church. Our commission was to try to find a way to reconcile and find common ground. But all we did all day long at the first meeting was argue and counter the other side's proposal and arguments with our better, more faithful proposals and arguments. It was a miserable day. When we finally decided to call it a day, it was 9:30 or 10:00 at night. Everybody was exhausted, frustrated, and angry. Someone suggested that we should pray, all of us. Their side would go first; we would conclude the prayer. Now all day long they had been accusing us of being not really orthodox, too liberal, implying, at least, that we were not authentically Christian. The invitation to pray felt like another challenge to the authenticity of our religion. Their first prayer was long. The second prayer was longer. Ot was global, thanking God for everything, pleading and asking God for a long list of favors. Then it was our turn. The gauntlet had been thrown. Without consulting or even looking at each other, Joanna and I made a secret pact. I knew what she was thinking; she knew what I was thinking: we would not be out-prayed. And we weren't. I went first and produced the longest prayer I had ever prayed in my life. She went next and her prayer was even longer. We clearly won, out-prayed our opponents. I both laugh at it and am deeply ashamed of it.

We can't help it. Augustine knew it. Martin Luther knew it. John Calvin knew it. Luther said the human self curves in upon itself. When we give alms, we admire our own generosity. When we pray, we listen to ourselves and evaluate and admire our ability to pray.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall remembers a psychology professor once telling him why we can't remember the name of a person to whom we were just introduced. It's because we are concentrating on how we will present ourselves, the professor explained, formulating what we will say, instead of focusing and concentrating on the other.

So Jesus' mandates to his followers are truly radical. Don't let your religion show in a way that brings credit to yourself. When you are doing that you are not only not saying "I love you" and "thank you" to God but are congratulating yourself. When you give alms, don't hire a brass band; don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. When you pray, go to your room and close your door. When you fast, wash your face, shave, put on your makeup, so that only you and God know what is going on.

The reward for self-serving religiosity is that people will notice and perhaps admire. That's what you want and that's what you get and, Jesus said, it has nothing to do with God.

Into this complex psychological dynamic, the Bible throws a radical, surprising proposal. You will receive a better reward when you stop thinking about rewards. You will receive what you most deeply need when you stop thinking about your needs and think about the needs of others.

Hall said it simply and eloquently: "Salvation for self-absorbed creatures like us means to lose our precious selves in the other, the one who receives our alms. When faith is true, Jesus affirms, we feel ourselves, here and there, now and then—graciously liberated from the burden of self, liberated for the other" (*Feasting on the Word*).

That is what a church is for, to call us together weekly to say "I love you" to God and "thank you" and to Jesus "I want to follow" and then to create concrete ways to do that: to translate words and hopes and aspirations into eloquent acts—to share bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to bring justice to the oppressed.

A memory has haunted me for decades. I was seventeen years old. I was walking from my home to the high school. It was an early morning, the second Saturday in November, the day of the Pennsylvania State cross-country meet. I was on my way to the school to meet the bus that would take us to State College. We were one of the favorite teams to win the state championship. I was excited, nervous, and cold. It was a bitterly cold morning, snowing hard with several inches already on the ground. At the foot of the wooden footbridge over the vast railroad yard that divided the city in two, I saw a little boy, maybe five or six years old. He was just standing there by the bridge, shivering. What I remember is that he had no gloves on and he was very cold and it was 7:00 in the morning and his nose

was running a lot. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any money. Even if I did, I don't know what he would have done with it. So I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped his nose and left him there standing at the foot of the bridge.

I don't think I have ever told that to anyone before. But the truth is I think about him a lot. I wonder what ever became of him. Why couldn't I have done more? Why didn't I . . .?

I don't presume that God put him there for me to wipe his nose, but I have come to believe that God used him to touch my heart, to teach me that religion is more than a lot of beliefs; that Christianity, if it makes any sense at all, is not about how precisely we memorize the creed or how long and ardently we can pray, but what we do about a little boy shivering in the cold at the foot of the bridge.

In the midst of thinking about these passages and this sermon last Wednesday evening, we were on our way to Ash Wednesday service. Because we are in the process of demolishing much of our program space to make room for a wonderful new building, we have to cram and crowd all of our existing programs into smaller spaces. It is not easy or orderly or quiet. In order to get to the quiet sanctuary of Ash Wednesday, we had to walk through Anderson Hall, crowded, every inch of it, with children, black and white, here for Tutoring. Their volunteer tutors were with them, sitting around round tables where they had also eaten a nutritious supper. It was noisy, chaotic, and utterly beautiful. We sat down in a pew, and the first lesson was the same passage we are thinking about this morning:

> Is not this the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of injustice . . .
> to share your bread with the hungry,
> and bring the homeless poor into your house>

There it was, in front of my eyes. It will happen again tonight when 150 homeless poor will sit at those tables in this house, and we will share our bread with them then and again on Monday night.

On Ash Wednesday, Adam Fronczek preached a fine sermon about God's love and then bread for our deepest hunger was shared with us and I sat

surrounded, by coincidence or not, in the middle of three persons, each dealing with very serious health issues, as they went forward for bread and cup—and I was a little overwhelmed by the grace and goodness and love of God in this place.

With ashes on our foreheads, aware of both our mortality but also the precious gift of our lives, we walked back through Anderson Hall. The children were gone. Tables were down, the carpet partially vacuumed.

Isaiah said when you share your bread and bring the poor into your house "your light shall break forth like the dawn."

I can't be sure, but I think I saw in that place where bread had been shared, where the love of God in Jesus Christ was made real in acts of kindness and humility and generosity to little ones, I think I saw something like beautiful light breaking forth like the dawn.

Amen.